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## State decides to push for more arsenic testing at Deer Lodge Park

By ERIN P. BILLINGS  
IR State Bureau

HELENA — Possible arsenic contamination at a public park in Deer Lodge could present enough health risks to evolve into widespread poisoning akin to asbestos exposure from a former vermiculite mine near Libby, the state's chief doctor said Wednesday.

Dr. Michael Spence, chief medical examiner for Montana, told a meeting of state health and environmental officials that if action isn't taken soon at Arrow Stone Park there could be long-term carcinogenic effects on local residents. "Basically, this is Libby in '80," said Spence.

Spence joined about a dozen state officials Wednesday to discuss the situation at the Deer Lodge park to figure out what role they can play in protecting the public from possible arsenic exposure. Arrow Stone Park is near where soil testing was conducted several years ago by the Atlantic Richfield Co. on arsenic, a cancer-causing substance.

Spence feared the Deer Lodge park could be a similar situation to that in Libby, the site of a former W.R. Grace vermiculite mine where hun-

dreds of local residents have suffered or died from asbestos-related illness. Federal officials now are trying to clean up the human and environmental damages from the mine, which closed in 1990.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) have been at odds over whether additional testing at the Deer Lodge park should be conducted and if so what levels of arsenic should be deemed too dangerous for recreational use. In a September 2000 letter to ATSDR, county commissioners withdrew a request for further soil sampling at the site until the two federal agencies agree on a consistent approach to assess the risks to the public.

Powell County health officer, Dr. Kathleen Evans, asked the state last month to get involved after more than a year of inaction by local officials.

Director of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality Jan Sensibaugh recommended Wednesday she and state Health Department Director Gail Gray write county commissioners to urge them to allow the additional soil testing to take place as suggested by the federal

health agency. Also, Sensibaugh said she would press the EPA to approve additional testing and agreed to try and weigh in on local efforts to educate the community about the dangers of arsenic.

"Let's see if we can't get something done," Sensibaugh said.

EPA scientist in Helena Scott Brown said throughout the 1990s testing on the soil has been conducted and shown minimal arsenic risk for recreational users in the area. He said those tests give a clear representation of the arsenic risk at Arrow Stone Park, which is probably less threatening because of the work done there to make it a public use area.

"The question is why would Arrow Stone Park be unique and different from the other 42 miles of the floodplain," said Brown.

Brown said the recreational standard for arsenic is 1,600 parts per million, while the average arsenic found in the floodplain is between 100-300 parts per million. He added that less than 3 percent is considered a hot spot or an area where the arsenic levels creep to high levels.

Chairwoman of the Powell Commission Kay Beck didn't

return phone calls Wednesday.

Officials also batted about the idea of moving ahead to put up warning signs in the area, but were unclear about whether they had the authority to do so. They said they were concerned that if nothing is done to at least warn the community about the possible threat of arsenic poisoning, children's lives would be at risk.

Todd Damrow, state epidemiologist, said disagreements between the EPA and the health agency must be put aside in "the name of children." Damrow added later that until action is taken, officials are "gambling" with kids' lives.

"Can we turn our back or close our eyes to that?" he asked. "What's going to happen years from now?"

Asked Ken Pekoc, spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services: "Why does EPA not want to err on the side of caution?"

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THE MONTANA STANDARD, BUTTE, WEDNESDAY, MAY 2, 2001 ■ A7

# Powell County health officer seeks help posting arsenic warning signs



FILE PHOTO

BY ERICKA SCHENCK SMITH  
of The Standard State Bureau

HELENA — After more than a year of inaction by local officials, Powell County health officer Dr. Kathleen Evans has turned to the state for help in putting up signs warning of arsenic-contaminated soil at several popular recreation areas along the Clark Fork River, including Arrow Stone

**ARSENIC** levels at Arrow Stone Park in Deer Lodge are believed to be a health risk.

Park in Deer Lodge.

Evans said she is merely following the recommendations of the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which has released new reports saying it still believes the signs are necessary. The agency also continues to disagree with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency findings that the areas are safe for recreation.

In an April 21 letter to the directors of the departments of Environmental Quality and Public Health and Human Services,

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## Arsenic ...

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Evans formally requested help making and erecting the signs.

"Please help ensure that the tragedies of other preventable hazardous exposures, such as in Libby, are not repeated in our Montana community," she wrote, referring to the asbestos-related health crisis in Libby. On Tuesday, Evans said the issue is also likely to come up during Thursday's quarterly meeting of the Powell County Public Health Board. She is a member of the board, as are the county commissioners. She predicted the commissioners will refuse to post the areas, or to clean them up or ask for further testing.

"If they say that, then I'm

going to say, 'I can't be party to this any more,'" Evans said in a telephone interview.

"This has been known as a potential problem and has been questioned for years."

County Commissioner Kay Beck said she had yet not heard that the ATSDR reports or Evans' request for warning signs would be on the agenda.

Ron Hanson, a contracted planner for the county, said the county is simply waiting for the two federal agencies to work together before making any decisions.

"We had requested that ATSDR and EPA get on the same page, so to speak," Hanson said. "We did not feel it was beneficial to the residents of this county, or any other area for that matter, to hear one thing from one federal agency and another thing from another federal agency.

... That's all we ask. We didn't want to be bothered in the meantime."

In a September 2000 letter to the ATSDR, the commissioners withdrew a request for further soil sampling "unless or until you and EPA agree on a consistent approach to assessing risks to the people who use Arrow Stone Park."

Hanson said it is simply too difficult to decide whom to believe about how much risk is acceptable. And, he added, the arsenic in the soil — the result of a long history of mining in the area — isn't a serious concern for many people in Deer Lodge.

"Keep in mind the residents of the area have lived here generation after generation," he said. "They have lived with the river in a much more contaminated situation than it's in today."